



Scientific research and conflict of interests: the needed inner control mechanisms

Stella Maris Martínez

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Conflicts of interests in scientific research refer to situations in which the scientist's view regarding the integrity of an investigation could be unduly influenced by the existence of secondary economic and personal interests.

The conflict of interests ought to be distinguished from acts of scientific bad faith, such as plagiarism and fraud because, although its presence can seriously affect the integrity of an investigation, it does not represent by

itself a deviation in ethics. However, as it is obvious, the possibility of the occurrence of damages will increase if the researches do not explicit in advance the existence of conflicts of interests.

When researchers establish some kind of personal relationship with a commercial company, their professional duties may clash with the desire to increase their income, their academic merit and / or their social recognition. The greatest conflicts arise when methods and research design, the verification or the result communication can be linked to compensations related to the success of the project: for example the imposition of a product on the market. (Cami, J- 1995)

Conflicts of interest are becoming more and more frequent as a result of the increasing cooperation between public research and the productive sector, a relationship sometimes automatically and uncritically assimilated to the transfer of knowledge to society which is one of the basic functions of the University.

The public research resources are increasingly insufficient at the public university, and the researchers are increasingly driven to seek new ways to self-financing. From an ethical standpoint, such behavior actively promoted from the agencies responsible for scientific policy of the Argentine state, is in principle neither good nor bad. But it should be kept well in mind that the society is confident that the state university exercise its functions -teaching, research and extension- with independent mind, on the basis of principles and criteria which are not necessarily consistent with the interests and the logic of the market. In these times when it seems to be necessary the seeking of innovative ways of financing for the scientific research, the University must be careful to avoid destroy the value that sustains and legitimizes such activity: the common good. (Martínez, S.M. y Nicolau, N.- 2008)

The demands of market force upon the sponsored research can affect the scientific debate, the open and communicative nature of the science and the technology search to satisfy legitimate human needs. While ethically conflicting situations can occur in all areas of science, some ethically reprehensible practices in the biomedical research field are, perhaps, the better known. For example, the sponsors (very often the international pharmaceutical companies) usually impose on researchers contractual obligations of confidentiality in order to delay publication of results, especially if these are adverse to place the product on the market. These reprehensible practices are common, despite the accurate warning of the Declaration of Helsinki. (Declaración de Helsinki - 2008)

How University could reduce the risk of the conflicts of interests

"If the University seeks and receives financial support from the market, inner control mechanisms should exist to assure that actions will be essentially addressed to advance in its own profit and institutional mission rather than obtaining money for some particular interest of the staff, even when legitimate". (Financiación de la actividad académica y conflicto de intereses - 2004). Acknowledging the need for joint funding with public and private capital, it should be remembered that university researchers are not mini-entrepreneurs, and the research teams should not become in groups thrown into the search for sponsors.

In the public University, conflicts of interests should be made explicit and regulatory public bodies are required to safeguard Integrity of the institution and its members as well as the legitimate interests of the society. (Criado, E. - 2008) This is particularly true in the "research under contract" where it is essential to make public who fund and under what terms.

There is no justification for the existence of any secret in the economic substance of the agreements between University researchers and the market. The University can prevent, at least partially, the risks of conflicts of interests by means of the regulation of researchers' duty to make public the statement of current and potential economic interests. Strict rules for financial participation, perception of fees or payments for services should be set. The statements by investigators should be prior and carefully reviewed by ad hoc committees. In the event of any conflict of interest in a sponsored project, the University should decide whether to grant the necessary previous permission.

Conclusion

Improving the ethical quality of scientific and technological cooperation between University and productive sectors will probably depend on face reality and assume the compromise to work in the definition of the interests, needs and obligations of both parties. The University needs to equip itself with inner regulations in order to identify conflicts of interest, and ought to develop its duties in accordance with the respect for legitimate interests of the community.

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